

MINUTES

Volunteer Firefighters Recruitment and Retention Task Force

Date/Time/Location: October 30, 2019 | 1:00 PM | Legislative Hall 2nd Floor

Meeting called to order by , Rep. John Larry Mitchell Jr, Chairperson

In Attendance

Present Task Force Members: Sen. Bruce Ennis, Sen. Brian Pettyjohn, Rep. John Larry Mitchell Jr. Rep. William Carson, Rep. Dan Short, Dir. A. J. Schall, Tom DiCristofaro, Chairman David Roberts, Brian Moore, Charles H. Harris, Robbie Murray, Robert Watts, Jay Jones, Warren Jones, Kate Rasuloova.

Guest Speaker: Dan Seador

Absent: Sen, Nicole Poore, Romain Alexander,

Introductions

The chair called the meeting to order at 1:00 PM and welcomed back everyone.

Approval of Minutes

Motion: **Mitchell** / Second: **Carson**

Meeting minutes from the October 30th meetings were presented, reviewed and approved with the following corrections:

- October – Correction on Jay Jones last name
- October – Aetna is the 2nd busiest company
- October – Warren reminded everyone it was Fire Prevention Week
- October – Rep. Carson began by stating that, as 55-year member of Smyrna
- October – Rep. Carson nominated Rep. John Larry Mitchell Jr. as the Chair of the Task Force.
- October – Brian Moore seconded Jay's thoughts on not doing what the other states were doing
- October – Robbie Murray pointed out that young people don't care much about the current incentives
- October – Robbie Murray mentioned that since the 80's, the contribution has been \$125/month
- October – Rep Carson added that the County to County parade is still the best way to create interest
- October – The Chair wanted to make sure all attendees had a copy of the House Concurrent Resolution #50

The Chair stated that Kate will provide attendees with October 30th meeting minutes after corrections being made.

All voted in favor. The motion passed.

Chair's Report

1. The Chair read all provided documents from last meeting and he found useful information on volunteer firefighters recruitment and retention in Aetna's comprehensive report and other documents. He stated that based on his readings and comments brought up last meetings, the committee is on track. The Chair gave the floor to Co-Chair.

Co-Chair's Report

2. The Co-Chair brought to attendees' attention that it must be difficult for Kate to catch who said what as attendees spread out across a large hall. He suggested it would be helpful for Kate if attendees introduce themselves given first name before making statements and/or any comments. The Co-Chair mentioned to include Claims for Workers Compensation in the minutes which he brought up at the last meeting as it is related to volunteer firefighter's recruitment and retention. He included that workers compensation is a

real problem for retention; he knows that because he deals with a lot of insurance companies about weekly benefits not being paid and medical bills. A letter from Delaware City pertaining to medical bills was passed around during last meeting with important information about this topic.

The letter was from Ed Kalinowski. He mentioned that the State of Delaware provides workers compensation coverage for our volunteers. However, Ed has been trying to work out some of the issues that Christiana Care medical billing has in regard to workers comp bills. They do not have a proper billing system. If an individual goes to them with a workers comp claim, they simply bill the provider that shows up under that particular individual in their system. This ultimately results in the patient being sent to a collection agency. Including Ed's most recent case, this has happened to 6 individuals over the years and it may deter volunteers from signing up with us. This issue does not currently happen with other providers like Bay Health.

The Co-Chair reemphasized that we should look into workers comp as it is an issue for retention. He brought up an example that in Delaware City, the medical bill of a female firefighter injured at work, for whatever reason, was not sent to PMA care office from Christiana hospital. As a result, she had to pay more because her bill was not paid by workers comp. We have to do something about this issue. He sees weekly benefits as another issue for volunteers. He has 2 volunteer firemen in his company who are being refused their weekly benefits until they get back to work, but they won't be able to do that for another 6 weeks. They were suggested to get an attorney but why should a person have to go through such inconveniences for the benefits that he deserves?

New Business

3. Closer look at research on legislations, recruitment and retention strategies for Volunteer Firefighters in New York, Pennsylvania and Maryland.

Warren stated that he went through Mark and his crew/staff's research work, and selected the ones that most closely align with the goal we are trying to reach. Those documents are provided to you today and they are from New York, Pennsylvania and state of Maryland. Also, on one of the documents he added a link to the recent (last year) Pennsylvania senate resolution #6 about creating a task force that's similar to ours. At the end of their meeting, they came up with a report which is only two pages long. He suggested to check out the link and download the resolution to learn more about it.

Tout of there came four bills specifically related to recruitment; those bills you have as well.

The Chair posed a question to Warren Jones:

Was there anything which jumped out that we have not yet discussed/talked about in the first meeting and that we need to look at?

Warren answered in the affirmative; there were a couple of topics in regard to incentives such as tax credits. All 3 states do them but differently. Maryland has a \$1250 tax credit which is off the top, not off the bottom like ours. The State of Pennsylvania offers property tax exemptions and school tax exemptions. Tuition credits are also common in New York and Pennsylvania.

Also, in addition to further income tax credits, some Vo-tech schools are starting programs for firefighters and EMS to get younger people involved in public safety fields.

Jay Jones added tuition loan forgiveness for higher education studies as another incentive that Pennsylvania offers.

That was the summary of the research; fiscal notes were asked about but were not part of the research this time around. We can go back and review those once our task force agrees to pursue a similar incentive.

Brian Moore informed that he conducted research and found out that New Castle County has Vocational Tech schools with emergency response programs that offer tuition reimbursement. They were exploring the possibility of using Title 4 funding to see if they could get some of the Vo-tech to do an exploratory program.

Warren mentioned that Deltech used to offer a fire services program years ago. It would be nice getting Vo-tech high schools to get younger people involved. Brian added that their high school had 100 students enrolled in that program. They had a first responder track up until 1995.

Rep. Short stated that the program needs a two years commitment and after graduating from it, there is no guaranteed job when compared to EMS. Who is going to do that if you are looking for a job after graduation?

Warren stated that some other states put a caveat in their requirements that they would provide students with firefighting courses tuition-free, but the students had to put in so many hours into volunteer services.

Rep. Short went back to the point of not having a job after completing that program, like those finishing EMS do. He stated that we have to find out what 23 – 55 year old people's hot buttons are when looking at this, and not ours as they are not the same.

Rep. Short continued to add that he is not trying to be destructive or adversary but is just making a point.

A J. Shall pointed out that rep. Short made a good point on what is there for them after school?

Only one caveat to that point, outside of schooling, is the fact that other larger departments are currently hiring people who are also volunteering for the state.

Rep. Short brought up the fact that it was the same issue 50 years ago with the Paramedic system. If you are going to create a career path for firefighters we might want to consider why anybody would volunteer as a firefighter when the guy next to him gets paid for doing it. That was just a question to consider.

A J. Shall answered that he has done it for 20 years while people got paid next to him. He added on that he doesn't think the program might not be fruitful because it does not have the capacity to bring in people like EMS does. Yes, they have a shiny job opportunity at the end of the program. Demand for that field is huge nationwide but what can we do on the fire side to become beneficial to volunteers?

Warren mentioned that all EMT's are also fire fighters and are constantly being used to fight fires. So from this perspective, he agreed with A J. Shall's points.

Rep. Short believes that if this is the route we want to take, we are destined to replace the same people we are trying to recruit, losing volunteers to career staff.

Warren understood his view and added that there was a line that we were missing. When we look at all the commendation departments, for instance around the DC metropolitan area, they all have volunteers but their philosophy is volunteers backing up career staff; our philosophy is career staff backing up volunteers.

The Chair stated that education incentives are still a possibility, but this is a lot tougher to achieve because Deltech does not have the program. But if the program was brought back because of a generated new interest in it, then he certainly welcomes the opportunity to allow people to take that program at Deltech, adding that they should even be required to serve within volunteer services to fulfill the correct number of years required after they graduate. For example, if that number was 5 years, then we would get an educated firefighter to

serve for at least 5 years. The problem is: would that incentive be enough for people to jump in if Deltech will offer the program? And would Deltech reinstitute this program?

Brian Moore, taking the example of the National Guard, posed the following question to the room:

If the student wants to major in accounting and graduate in 5 years can we reimburse his expenses and get the 5 year commitment? We still treasure accountants in the states. Maybe that is another avenue to look at. In this case our kids will be doing it in a heartbeat.

The Chair brought up the educational system he instituted for law enforcement. The incentives for it were that they asked the departments to advertise when they were recruiting for new applicants. In the past, they had 1000-1200 applications for 18 – 19 positions but now that has changed as the economy got better. However, he believes there is still a possibility to entice people to jump into fire services even if we can't provide full-time jobs. The big name in the state is the city of Wilmington and their full, paid staff is still under 200 firefighters. There may not be a lot of paid opportunities within the state, but if someone truly realizes that education is an opportunity, and they go to school and do their commitment to the volunteer fire services, then there are opportunities for recruitment.

Something to note is that fire fighter courses have changed and they are structured now to allow students to learn about different aspects of emergency services. For example, Deltech courses are now more geared towards the engineer side of things, like the installation of sprinklers, and not so much on actual fire fighting. Their Intro to Fire Investigation course had inspectors present.

The Co-Chair stated there is another way to address this issue rather than tuition: getting loan forgiveness. Such legislations have been going around nationally. So we need to bring a bill for emergency personnel with loans and make sure those people who receive loan forgiveness first stay in volunteer fire services enough time for their loan to be forgiven.

The Chair clarified Co-Chair's statement: if a person enrolls in college and is taking courses, regardless of their field of studies, as long as they are servicing volunteer fire services at some point, then their loans should be forgiven.

The Co-Chair added that a good interest indicator for recruitment is the enrollment numbers for the firefighting course. Last year, including summer session, there were about 200 volunteer firemen taking the course. In 2010, the Delaware State Fire School's basic course had an enrollment of 439 individuals. In 2017 it had gone down to 223. The trend has been decreasing and it's a serious issue.

A J. Shall emphasized that this committee is as important as it has ever been, as those previous numbers show. He continued to add that whatever recommendations come out of this committee need to be those shiny stars that really get people. Looking at the minutes from last meeting, which he didn't get to attend, the benefits discussed like the pension system are not cutting it. He thinks that 19, 20 and 21 year-olds are not filling out paperwork no matter how much we emphasize the benefits to them; they don't see as it important anymore. If it's not something they can tangibly feel, which can benefit them in a positive way, we're going to miss the mark on this. We have done a lot of good things but this time we need to think big. If not, we will be talking about what municipalities from other states are going to do to provide full time coverage across our state.

The Chair agreed to A J. Shall's points. He added that whatever recommendations we decide on, at the end of the day it is going to be on the individual fire service company to advertise and get out the word that we are

looking for volunteer firefighters. Hosting open houses and community involvement events to sit down and inform people. They would be saying that as a result of this task force here is what we are going to offer you if you consider serving volunteer fire services. He added that it is important to keep that in mind.

Old Business

Dan Seador, Rep. from Aetna company thanked the committee for giving him the floor. He continued to add that clearly, they have been dealing with the same issue, not only recruitment and retention but also a combination of things like the department is growing faster than they can keep up with and the facilities that are falling apart. It took them a year for the consultant to get them that report that is in front of everyone completed, which is everything from A to Z including finances, operation, administration, apparatus, facilities, money management, etc.

Their intent for the report was a bit selfish; they saw it as a leverage they could use to come to legislative bodies and say they were hurting and need help with resources include staffing. Having the consultant complete it as a third party and confirm their needs added to their credibility.

The report emphasized the company's living program. During his meeting last Sunday with the chiefs of New Castle County, they were asking how they can push the living program out here. The program has been a great resource for them - they pay guys to live right across the street from one of the fire houses but there is an expense incurred with that.

They had another meeting last night talking about this very topic and the whole idea of providing scholarship for these students. They believe that's a carrot they can hang out in front of them and, just referring to our earlier conversation, this would be a great way to go market to young people saying if you come here and be active for 5 years, we cover your tuition from Deltech. A J. Schall is on point: this generation is looking for pretty instant gratification. They don't see pension down the road, unfortunately.

One of the state representatives he conversed with last night wondered about providing insurance for volunteer firefighters. So if we have young people out there that are no longer under the umbrella of their parents' insurance and they're just twisting in the wind, we could advertise that we are going to cover their medical insurance. Those are the kind of costs that are incurred by this age group. One other conversation they had last night was about creating a foundation or a way to establish funds that we could use to draw from and give scholarships or help pay some of their tuition to the University of DE and Deltech. Those are some of the incentives that speak to this age group.

The report that everyone had in front of them goes into some pretty granular details on things that they are dealing with at Aetna, and most people might have not had a chance to go through it. However, Warren has Dan's email and if anyone has any questions, he is happy to assist.

Rep. Short clarified that even though their living program is for university students, they haven't said no to someone who wasn't a student and wanted to be a part of it. They have 8 benefitting from it currently and are looking to expand that program. They have more people waiting to get in. In their discussion from Sunday with the other fire companies, the question of how that can be achieved came up. Some of the fire companies are in a location where they might be able to access property near them that would help with housing. For others it's going to be a matter of building onto the back road. That would be a big expense. So when considering legislation, the companies would be looking for grants and that kind of stuff.

Tom DiCristofaro stated that, depending on where they're located, some fire companies handle a lot more alarms than others. So when it comes to staffing and keeping active, there's still a lot to overcome there.

Rep. Short agreed with those differences and the challenges they bring about.

If one looks at the State's firefighters pension plan, it is strictly left up to each individual fire company to determine who is active and who isn't. And, unfortunately, the company getting 1000 calls is getting the same funding as the company getting 200 calls. That's a big disparity and we need to look at that at some point. In New Castle County, Christiana ran 5000 fires and 11000 calls this year.

Tom DiCristofaro stated that those 16 - 18 year olds that we are trying to grab care about money and electronics. There's no family bond anymore with fire houses like there were a couple of years ago. We all understand that.

He had handouts that Kate will share with the committee, relating to this matter. A 2006 article stated that we need a fire tax, a bill giving additional funds to pay additional staff or at least give stipends to them. Unfortunately, it all falls back to money.

Tom DiCristofaro was analyzing taxes and a lot of those funds go to EMS. Every home owner knows that.

Tom DiCristofaro had a \$2.4 million operating budget and 48% of it comes from county and state funding. He is in charge of raising 52% of it. He realized that we are the only public safety entity, across the whole 9 yards from crossing guards to marshals to paramedics, that not only don't get paid but also don't have enough funds. We need funding and money. Benjamin Franklin screwed us up when he did it all for free hundreds of years ago. New Castle County is now trying to fix the fire side by putting EMS units in bypass or at a service so we can put the fire truck on the streets. That doesn't do any good if my next-door neighbor is having a heart attack.

The Co-Chair stated that another issue for getting money is public support. Many of the public, not those who transferred but those who have been here for a while and understand funding for EMS and fire services, don't quite get it. They think that the state and federal government, through their tax system, provides all the support for these services but that isn't the case. We talked about how the state is giving the same amount of grant money to each fire company. So many counties like Sussex and New Castle give a basic rate to fire companies.

The main problem is that the public does not contribute anywhere near what they should. This year we're lucky if we got 18% of the public responding to the letters and mail we sent them.

Tom DiCristofaro also pointed out that people don't know we are volunteers and they are not paying their fair share. No one wants to hear tax, no one wants to hear fee.

The Chair stated that one of the biggest things we missed every year is the property tax. Highlighted in one of the reports that everyone had was the increase by \$9 in the property tax. People don't know how much more the property tax would be if fire services weren't around. We should educate the public about the fact that they are actually saving money by choosing to pay a fire tax instead of a higher property tax.

The Chair will contact the Sarah, the Sr. Analyst, to go through all of the packet that we were provided with and pick out the fine points that are of most interest us.

Robbie Murray posed a question:

Is there any opportunity to reach out to either high school students or those at local colleges and ask them what would cause them to volunteer for an agency?

He hadn't seen any representative from that group and yet, we are trying to find out how to capture them. Perhaps we can work with the Department of Education and get a pole that goes out to seniors and/or juniors about what is important to them. We could ask how they would make a decision to volunteer for fire services or any organization in general. "Give me your top 5 things that you are looking for?"

Charles Harris agreed that we need to collaborate with the Department of Education to conduct surveys for students.

Brian Moore stated that drawing inspiration from another event, he suggested that we could also put together focus groups with students and parents and ask them those questions. He mentioned that there are some groups, like EC, that we could ask to help us out with that. We can certainly look into it. One opportunity, for example, is a media program in one of the districts which wanted to engage the students and get their opinion.

Brian Moore thought students would be more than willing to collaborate. We could give them the options and ask them what the best incentive would be.

Brian Moore also add that when you work at the university, your kid gets free tuition. That doesn't cost the institution anything since they capped the number of those students. So, in that case, maybe we can reconsider our programs and not have to spend all that amount of money. Some of the municipality people can attend MIT for free because they're just auditing the classes; it doesn't cost the college a dime. The professors are already there and so are the empty chairs.

The Co-Chair agreed that we need to get education behind these young people. However, there isn't much support from schools unfortunately. His local company sends people to schools for improvement and he knows. The state also has contests that many schools participate in. The problem is that we now have to have younger people participate, 14-15 year olds instead of 16-18 year olds, because the latter ones don't engage as much anymore.

Robbie Murray had a different experience. Recently they visited a school and gave a presentation which was very successful, and each fire company walked away with a minimum of 5 applications. However, he argued that it takes a lot of planning and timing involved in going and meeting with students, and giving them effective presentations. In the past it was a lot easier.

Brian Moore stated that every month he meets with the superintendents and representatives from each county. He asked permission from the task force to add the topics of the research programs, focus groups and the need for volunteers to the agenda for their next meeting.

Jay Jones stated that the DVFA has been very active on social media already, such as YouTube, radio and even had a video playing at DMV where they advertised and got the word out. They brought fire prevention materials into the schools. They talked to various schools directly and the response was that because of their

agenda regulations, they don't have the time to fit them in for presentations. Then they talked to the secretary and she's a big supporter of their fire coaching program. So she said she will strongly recommend them to the schools but can't force them to do anything. He also mentioned spending over \$10,000 on ads through multiple channel. His conclusion was that all these efforts have been working but haven't been giving them the best ROI.

The Chair stated that getting younger people to attend our meetings and hear from them directly about the kind of issues or motivations they have would be helpful.

It was suggested that the committee could vote on that, as well.

The Chair mentioned marketing and how it's not happening enough in Sussex County. He gave the example of the Motorcycle Riders Education Safety Committee and how a number of different schools did the video work for their advertising videos. The committee members took the students out and they recorded the scenes needed. He believes that there's an opportunity worth exploring in that. We could get in touch with the schools' media classes and have this be a project. The students would enjoy riding in a fire truck with a paramedic unit and filming it all to put something together for us.

It was also mentioned that last year there was a program through the Office for Public Safety about traffic stop awareness. They were able to get AAA give them a scholarship to do videos. They had 25 submissions and gave out awards to the top 3 candidates. The students loved working on it.

The Chair reemphasized the fact that marketing is important and that we need to do a better job at it. The issue is general; most organizations fail at marketing in Delaware. But it is a small state and we should be able to do better than what we are currently doing. This is something that this committee needs to focus on once we come up with a report.

He also mentioned that the Chamber of Commerce should have a representative in this committee but there is currently no one. Several people have reached out to them but they have not responded yet on this matter. The governor was reminded to reach out to them. It would be great if we could have a representative from there as them being involved with the business community could bring us good information.

Next Meeting

The next task force meeting – 10:00AM, Wednesday, November 20th, Legislative Hall 2nd floor.

Motion to adjourn the meeting at 2 p.m. was voted-on and passed unanimously.

Minutes Submitted by: Kate Rasulova